

“Coming to the
United States
Was Not Easy.”

Asma and Taylor

“Coming to the United States Was Not Easy.”

A: Oh.

T: Yeah.

A: Oh. [pause. sighs] If I say something, I, I don't want you to cry, and, and I don't want it, the people who, who read cry, but I never raped, I never get abused, but sometimes life is abusing you, and, yeah, life is abusing you sometimes to listen, to, to learn the lesson, but every...mistake [?] of my life, I learn something, I learn something. Yeah. Coming to the United States was not easy.

[At age seventeen, Asma left her mother and three sisters and the violence and fear of Somalia behind. Over the next two years, she would travel to Dubai and then Syria, where she filed a refugee application to come to the United States. This series of selections attempts to paint a picture of some of her experiences throughout her time as a refugee in Syria.]

T: But I was curious...So how did you get from Somalia, to...to Syria next, right? For college.

A: Yeah, yeah.

T: So you said your mom didn't know how to get you out of the country.

A: Yeah.

T: So how did you—

A: There is a family, there is a family.

T: Okay.

A: Who, who wanna come to—actually, not Syria. They come to the, eh, Dubai. Do you know Dubai?

T: Dubai. Yes.

A: They come to Dubai. We went to, we stayed there, um...

T: So you went to Dubai with this family?

A: That family, yes.

T: How did you know this family?

A: This family—my mom, and the man who had this family, they are very close.

T: Yeah.

A: And they were our neighbors.

T: Oh, okay.

A: Yeah. So... That neighbor's family, they want to move the country.

T: Okay.

A: So, they don't want a longer—he was a doctor, the man he was a doctor. They were not longer for staying there, so...

T: They didn't want to stay in Somalia.

A: No. Maybe his family sending the money I don't know, but he want to travel to Dubai, to look at new life, new job. He doesn't know where he wanna go.

T: Right.

A: And I didn't know where I wanna go.

T: Okay.

A: And my mom—I'm *sure* I want to go to college—

T: Yeah.

A: And, and my country is the...Is like a...Here, we call the fifty states the United States, right?

T: Right.

A: And my country...I don't know what the nation called. We are like, um, I'm not profession—
[laughs]

T: You are so okay. I can look it up.

A: They are if-if-if I graduate in my country, and I want to go to any country, Arabic country—

T: Mhm.

A: They have a position for thirty chairs...Thirty chairs for each years to the students coming around the country.

T: Okay, so you could be an international student from an Arabic country and go to a—they have, they have spots for you in other countries, as well.

A: Every country, yeah, every country.

[As the family she travelled with searched for a job, Asma continued to look for a college to attend. However, Dubai did not hold the promise they hoped it would have.]

A: We come to Dubai, we stay in Dubai maybe two to three months, after two to three months, he doesn't like it.

T: Doesn't like it?

A: Doesn't like it. Yeah. We come to Syria...Syri—He come to Syria by, by just checking up. He's not sure he can get a job, because Syria...Other people cannot get a job. Dubai, maybe, yes. He come to Syria, after he come to Syria, the situation changed. The money he have it no longer, he-he cannot have more money—

T: Okay.

A: So, Dubai I didn't find a school, so people are say, "Oh, this school is very hard to get it, ah, lot of students from here, they're still not getting—"

T: The school in Dubai?

A: Yeah.

T: Was hard to get into?

A: Yeah. And then, eh, we come to Syria, and I went with them, in Syria.

T: Yeah.

A: And after we come to Syria, the family are very broke.

T: Yeah.

A: Like there's no longer money. So... They tell, they tell my mom—They, they didn't tell my mom, he write the paper, and he told me, "You have to read this paper, um, just see if I'm gonna send your mom, I'm not gonna take your responsibility to find..." Yeah.

T: They can't help you anymore.

A: Yeah. So...and I tell him, "Where are you gonna go, if you can't stay here?" He say, "I may go to Saudi Arabia to find a job."

T: Yeah.

A: "I'm gonna take the family, but there's not a lot of money to take you anymore. Is expensive, the visa for the Saudi Arabia." I say, "Okay." It was very sad, that day. I don't know nobody in Syria...

T: And they left you.

A: Yeah.

T: They just left you behind.

A: Yes, yes. They left me. But before they left me, I went to the office for, uh, refugee office?

T: Okay.

A: I went to the refugee office. I ask them to help me, and then, eh...Refugee office? They're not gonna promise you the first, the first day, like, you have, you have to take the process [laughs].

T: Yeah.

A: And they don't have houses. Just a office.

T: So you were looking for a college—you never enrolled in a college.

A: No, not in my life.

T: You never found a university.

A: No, I found it, I found it. But I—after, after I stayed—there is a, a community office, Somali community—

T: Okay, so you were in the school, you got in, you got one of the thirty seats...

A: Yeah.

T: But you realized, you can't live there, you can't live there on your own.

A: No no. We went to Syria.

T: Yeah.

A: And right away, maybe between one month and few weeks...

T: Okay.

A: They decided to leave.

T: Okay. Okay.

A: And we're new. We don't even know nobody.

T: Right. So did you find a school at that point?

A: I find it, I find it later.

T: You found it later.

A: After they left me, yeah, I went to the office, and they put me in a community for the community, Somali community?

T: Yeah.

A: They put me there. So one woman, one woman take me to her house. One woman who live there take me to her house. She show me the college. She show me a lot of things, I applied the application for the refugee office, I applied the college, so applying the college, you have to wait a year.

T: Okay, so you applied to the college and you applied to the refugee thing at the same time.

A: Yeah. So you have to wait one year to process your applications. Because I-I failed the, I filled the application for the late. Like, I filled the application in August.

T: Right.

A: So in August, if you fill it, you have to wait it the next year until...

T: Until the next year starts.

A: Right. But I didn't start it. [chuckles]

T: But you didn't even start it. You, you left—your refugee application finished...

A: Yeah, yeah.

T: ...Before your college application.

[Since the family who had brought her this far could not afford to support her any further, Asma had to remain in Syria. So, she met with a leader of the Somali community there in order to seek help.]

A: Until now, I never have his picture, but...Going back memory in my mind, I *see* him, like... The first time I see him, I have the one picture like, I—that day, I never remem—I never forget for him, I never forget the way he look, the way he accept me.

T: Mhm.

A: I—Some people afraid for me, they say, “Oh, maybe he didn't accept you. There's a lot of people...They give him headache.”

T: Mhm.

A: I mean, a lot of people ask him things, and you don't know who can he help, and who cannot he help.

T: Yeah.

A: I mean, communities, community cannot help any-everything the people needed.

T: Right.

A: And the first time I see him in the office, he was smiling, and he get up and he welcome me and I tell him, “I'm only me. [breathy laugh] No my mom, no my sister with me, no-no one is with me.”

T: Okay.

A: And then he tell me, “What can I help you, young lady?” I say, okay—he speak Somalian, I'm just translation...

T: Yeah!

A: [chuckles] And I say, “I'm here far away from my family, and I don't have a family here.” He say, “How are you here?” I say, “I went with the, with the family, and now they wanna leave.” He say, “Why are they leaving you here? Why are they pick you there until here—why are they leaving you?” I say, “They have a, a situation, find a place to live, place to get a job...And, and I want to stay here because I already filled the application for eh, that office...”

T: Right.

A: “...and I filled the application for the college and I want to start something...”

T: Right.

A: "I want to start to know the country. And they speak Arabic, is easy for me to speak Arabic. It's not easy for communication, I'm not perfect for communication for that, but I already know how to write, how to read, so kind of like I feel I can understand. Kind of like, I feel like I'm right place, I understand this country."

T: Mhm.

A: "I'm not afraid for anything. So, I like to stay," I say. And he say, "Okay, do you have a place to live?" I say, "No." He say, "Do you have anyone else to send you money to live?" I say, "No!" He say, "How you want to survive?" I say, "I don't know." He told me, "How old are you?" I say, "I'm, ah, seventeen years old. Going to eighteen years old."

T: Yeah.

A: "Seventeen going to eighteen years old." And he say, "Ohhhh. And you don't know where is your mom?" I say, "No! I can let you to talk to my mom, so you can ask her, she let me to go here because of my safety." He say, "I understand." And he told me to sit. "I'm gonna look. I'm gonna call a few families' to stay with them."

T: Right.

[fade]

A: And he did it. The, this family responds, one of family, they um, agree with me, to take me in their home.

[Asma lived with a mother and her three daughters, whose husband lived abroad and sent money back to Syria.]

A: And anyway, after I find the family, I thank him a lot for the man who was a community leader?

T: Yeah.

A: He find a good place for me.

T: Yeah.

[fade]

A: They were beautiful, beautiful family. I never forget them, how they nice to me.

[She felt like this family had accepted her fully. Asma helped around the house and with the children, and whenever the father visited, he treated her like a member of the family. He even sent her money for Eid, a Muslim holiday.]

A: So that family was like my family, and I loved them. And they loved me, too. [breathy laugh]

[Meanwhile, the refugee application process stumbled on, and Asma decided not to pursue the college application.]

T: And so, were you trying to get into classes at that point still, or were you just, just on the refugee application at that point?

A: No, I... What happened is the college needed, um, to follow.

T: Mhm.

[fade]

A: I write I was seventeen years old, and as soon as they find my application and the thing I put in there put in the application there, they interest me a lot.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. They just call me right away, after one—after twenty-five days, they call me.

T: Okay.

A: First interview after twenty-five days. Second, second interview, it was between thirty days.

T: Yeah.

A: Third interview... They take me interview seven times...

T: Seven interviews.

A: Before they, they put me, um, before they accepted me. Before they accepted me, they gave me *seven time* interview, and I don't know when I was...

T: What were those interviews like?

A: Is very hectic.

T: Yeah?

A: Like, is not to scare you.

T: Yeah.

A: They just ask you some question.

T: Yeah.

A: But—[laughs] I used to get tired. Sometime four hours.

T: Yeah?

A: [laughs] Yeah. And sometime I say, "I'm very tired, I don't remember anything." And they say, "You know—" She told me, "You know what make us to bring you every time here?"

T: Yeah.

A: And I say, "No." They say, "You're very young. How you remember all, all of this?"

T: Yeah.

A: I say, “That’s my life.” I am...I know I’m uh...A lot to remember. That’s a lot to remember—you ask me a lot, things my go back to story, not what is happen now.”

T: Yeah.

A: So you’re asking me what it make me to remember is, I’m recording. I’m recording my life, because I don’t have a normal life. I have a...place to place, place to place, place to place. So it, you, you see everything’s new. You see a lot of things new in your life. If I live one place, if I grew up in one city, one house, since I’m born until now, I may my memory not remember a lot of things because every day is same day. So what do you want me to remember every day is same day. But moving a lot, every time something happen, going to another city, having your mom, your sister, sometime I leave my sister, sometime I play with the kids, my sister...

[fade]

T : And they said, “You have to wait two years. You have to wait until you’re eighteen—or nineteen.”

A: Mhm. But that two years, it was, it was hard for me. When you say in your mouth, “Two years.”

T: Yeah.

A: But the process, time go fast [snaps]...

T: Yeah.

[Time *did* move quickly. Asma kept herself busy, working a few hours a week as a receptionist at a dentist’s office. She also volunteered with special needs children through a program at the refugee office; took a CPR course; and prayed a great deal—in addition to helping around the house. Once that family left for Minnesota, she moved in with their grandmother and her special needs son. When the grandmother left, she moved in with another single girl her age and a married woman whose husband was living in Norway.]

A: And we rent the cheap house, we can afford it, two-two bedrooms...

T: So was it young women, like your age, kind of?

A: There-there is one who was married...

T: Okay.

A: And have a little daughter—

T: Okay.

A: I have that picture. I have that picture, the girl, the little baby one, I have her picture. So, that one, and her mom...

T: Yeah.

A: Her husband, he is in, eh...Norway. Do you know Norway?

T: Norway, yes!

A: That little one, her husband—that, that woman, her husband in Norway, but she just have a new baby. She was almost one year, she was trying to walk, that time. I used to take her to the shopping stores who is that close to our house...

T: Mmm.

A: For walking...

[fade]

A: Yeah, and, but—she—her husband is there, but he still want her to have a, a... some ah—in Somalia we call it something but I don't know what to call it in English—friend! She doesn't wanna be alone, her and her baby at home, and he send her—

T: Like a roommate?

A: Like a roommate, yes—and he send her, eh, not enough money. Like a small, small money. It's not enough for her...everything to pay rent, full rent or something like that.

T: Was she, was she trying to get to Norway, too?

A: No. Because he have another wife there.

T: Oh, he has another wife there. [whispers]

A: Yeah, my religion, I mean you can marry four, four wife. I don't know if you hear or no... [laughs]

T: No, no! It's—so she didn't want to go to Norway. She was just staying—

A: She want to, but he doesn't let her to go...

T: Wow.

A: Yeah.

T: So is she still in Syria?

A: Um, she go back home, in Somalia.

T: She's in Somalia?

A: Yeah.

T: Does she see her husband?—

A: I, I used to feel like sad, when I ask her something. She was, she was...people who believe the religion a lot.

T: Yeah.

A: A lot.

T: They leave it, you mean? Or they live...?

A: She believes.

T: Believes in it a lot. Oh, okay.

A: She believed in the religion more than anything. There are some people who learn the religion like me, but...I mean, I am human, I cannot follow every step. I know the religion, my family teach me the religion, but I also...human, I also young, and sometime I broke the rules.

T: Yeah.

A: But there is some people you can find and they are *so* believers, strong follow making, making themselves, like uh, to follow every step. And that's beautiful, that's beautiful.

T: Yeah?

A: In-in-in my culture, when I see someone follow the religion exactly what is it, it's very little bit hard, but...we say this person is perfect.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. [pause] And she used to obey her husband, whatever he say.

T: She was...yeah. So she went back to Somalia?

A: Yeah.

T: Yeah.

A: With her baby, yeah...

T: Does she still see him? Would he ever come and visit her, or no?

A: When I was there, he visit her.

T: Yeah?

A: And we left the home, we say, "Hey, your husband is coming, we have to be out!" [laughs]
Yeah me and other, other girl.

T: And the other girl...

A: Yeah, there's another girl, she was, eh, single, but the United States office, they didn't accept her, and...She get married man who come in Norway, too.

T: Oh, so she went to Norway?

A: He take her there! Yeah, after I...I here three years old, three years, after I went to the United States three years.

[fade]

A: And finally I say, “He was a good man! He did what you want!” [laughs] Yeah.

T: “He was a good man, he did what you wanted,” you said?

A: Yeah, yeah. Because what happen is...I’m gonna tell you another story but you, you don’t gonna like it. It’s a little bit sad... [nervous, silent laugh]

T: That’s—I love every story you tell me, you can tell me the sad stuff, like it’s okay. I-I think...

A: Yeah, it’s very sad...

T: Tell me the story you want to tell. Um...And I’m okay with emotions. It’s so okay.

A: I know...I know...But I don’t like it.

T: Okay.

A: I hundred percent support womens.

T: Yeah.

A: Womens...womens are my hero.

T: Yeah.

A: Because I don’t think so women like to do...There’s some stranger people, I know girl be stranger, I know man, man can be stranger, but the man’s thinking they are, they are smarter than us, and I feel like we are human being, we are *important* people, we *are*. We are the gift of God, we are important...

T: Yeah.

A: —if you are man, woman, black, yellow, green, whatever you are, we are the *gift of God*.

T: Mhm.

A: And each of us is important. And if you take responsibility, take it what it is. I know human, human, they’re not perfect.

T: Right.

A: But don’t mess with the people.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. I-I-I feel very sad. I used to talk my mom, and she used to tell me, “Get anything you want in this life. If you find someone you, you love him, at the right place, at the right time...” She know me I’m travelling, so I’m a refugees, so... She used to tell me one thing: “When you get ready, *marry*. But you have to know you are right place? Are you right place? Is your last destination to stay? Are you one hundred percent you want to live that country and stay?” She used to tell me, “Never marry a man who is living far away from you.

T: Yeah.

A: “That’s not a marriage. That’s not a marriage.” Because in my religion we cannot have a boyfriend, like um, you can have a boyfriend, what we call boyfriend, but we cannot *live* with the boyfriend.

T: Okay.

A: You cannot create a *family* without, without no marriage.

T: Right.

A: Yeah. So...Having family is important. Marriage is important.

T: Yeah.

[fade]

A: But when I was in Syria, a lot of girls cry my shoulders.

T: Yeah?

A: And I—I can be one of them....

T: Yeah.

A: But the thing it make me to feel strong when I was with the girls, when I was by myself, I used to cry, I used to go to bed, the bedroom and cry, I say, “Why are they so enemy like that, the mens?”

T: Because the men would...would fall in love with them and then leave?

A: And then leave.

T: And then leave.

A: I’m not talking about—I’m *not* talking about those who leave, who, who stay together.

T: Yeah.

A: If girl and boy like to be together and, they didn’t like each other, and they left each other, that’s the our, our relationship is not working.

T: Right.

A: I’m all fine with that. But they used to come back in Europe—you know Europe?

T: Yeah.

A: Some are they living in Norway, some are they living in England, some they are lov—living in—I mean you know, all the Europe, there’s a lot of refugees, in America, they come—a lot of refugees in Canada—they come in single, they work a little bit, they save some money, they go back S—in, in Syria, they go back in, Egypt—you know Nasser[?]?

T: Mhm.

A: There's a lot of refugees girl there, and they go back in Kenya, they go back everywhere in refugees camps, and they get married and then some girl who want to save her life.

T: Yeah.

A: I mean, when I was in Syria, I want someone to share my life with me. But not far away. If you're far from me, you cannot do anything for me.

[fade]

A: Um, they get married, in hotel...

T: Yeah.

A: Because he's leaving, so he can marry you in hotel, or maybe they rent an apartment, and after the marriage is ended, he's telling you, "Okay. You can live with your friend. The way you used to, before. And I'm gonna send you money, and I'm gonna, uh, do some um, paper work to come to the country to live with me."

T: Yeah.

A: That-that-that's the reason they get married first. Because no one agree, "You live there, I live here, that's the marriage." No one agreed. The girl want to, to leave that country because, to come with you.

T: Yeah.

A: They say that, and after they left—maybe they didn't like the girl, maybe they didn't...see another girl in that country he lives...

T: Yeah.

A: They changing their mind. And they get divorced.

T: And they get divorced.

[fade]

A: Some girls they get pregnant without...no financial, nothing, and he left it. He never answer the phone, she don't know where is he...Forever.

T: And can they...

A: They don't know what to do—

T: And they're...

A: They're not with their family.

T: Yeah.

A: They—the man who make her pregnant, he left her. Even I find it here in America, it happens something like that, but...back home, in my country, is-is not most like that.

T: Yeah.

A: If the girl marry, she's married. She's with her husband.

T: Yeah.

A: She's gonna have the kids. If they don't like each other, they get divorced it's nothing. But when someone co-coming outside the country and they marry you and you just dream like you leaving this country you have a husband now and...

T: You start a new life.

A: Yes! Start a new life. I mean it's different when someone leave you and telling you, "Hey, I'm take you...few years. I'm gonna take you and we're gonna be happy and we're gonna have a dream house and a dream life and they just..."

T: And they just...

A: And they just leave them *heartbroken*.

T: Did that happen a lot?

A: A lot. A lot.

T: A lot of your friends.

A: A lot of my friends.

T: Did you ever...fall in love with someone...in Syria?

A: [sighs] Not really love. Not true love. Not perfect, true love. I-I-I interest some people, kind of like—those, those boys who were there. Not somewhere else, in...

[So Asma did not fall in love with anyone in Syria. She saw the pain it caused the other women in her life, and the guidance of her mother encouraged her to be smart about her own heart. Though they did not communicate often, Asma and her mother did manage to send letters back and forth, and the advice her mother provided was an important source of confidence for Asma.]

A: And, sometime, my mom, she used to—after I get contact with my mom for the paper, one, one day, she, she write to me, "You didn't go to college?" I say, "Mommy, no, they say they're gonna take me, and I start working and helping myself, and, um, they give me few money." And she told me, "Okay, you sure they gonna take you? You sure they just let you...to stay because you're young and they don't wanna take you, they're just telling you that?"

T: Mhm.

A: [laughs] I read the paper and I say, "Mommy"—my mom, she don't read, she don't write.

T: Yeah.

A: But some other people write for her and she just send...And when I send the paper, someone else read it for her.

T: Mhm.

A: So I tell her, “Mommy, that was, that what they say.” I don’t know if they take me, I don’t know if they even, why they keeping me here.”

T: Yeah.

A: So my mom told me, “Okay, check every time office, maybe two, three months, and if you don’t go there, they gonna forget you.” [laughs]

T: Yeah. And you used to do that.

A: And I used to do that, keep checking in, like I keep checking my mom right now.

T: Yeah.

A: I go keep checking, keep check...And then...Finally, yes, finally...There’s office, there’s office they call, um...what’s the name? IOM.

T: IOM?

A: Yes, you ever hear?

T: Mmmm...

A: It’s the final destination for the visa.

T: Is it the International Office of Migration? Is that it?

A: Yes! That is what it stand in for, that’s what it stand for, yes. So, the separate office. The office for the refugee, that’s a one, the biggest one. You go to them from zero until, eh, a refugee.

T: Yeah.

A: And then after you done here, your job, they gonna send you IOM.

T: Okay.

[fade]

A: I get the interview, and after the interview—they didn’t ask me a lot of things, it was just five minutes...

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah, they just wanna make sure I am here. And they, they take me fingerprinted, and my finger printer, it was the most difficult, it take me one hour.

T: Wow!

[fade]

A: Yeah. And I get there, and I wait twenty days.

T: Okay.

A: After interview and paper who come back to Washington, twenty days.

T: Yeah.

A: After twenty days, after twenty days, I go back to the office, I have the appointment, they tell me, "Come here, have a letter come, and we wanna see you."

[And so, after months of interviews and waiting, Asma goes to the IOM office and sits in a waiting room filled with people who are desperate to hear about their own futures.]

A: Some people, they say, "Sorry, America didn't accept you." Some people say, "You are accepted. You are waiting for the next month for the visa."

T: Yeah.

A: That's the final destination. And then...there's family before me. Whole family.

T: Yeah.

A: Kids and mom. They didn't accept it. I was very, very, very sad, I say, "All these years and no accepted. No and yes? You're waiting for no and yes for all these years? What am I supposed to...?" I started thinking...

T: So you started thinking, "What if this is gonna happen..."

A: Yeah, I, yeah, I started thinking, "What happen if they didn't accept you?"

T: Right.

A: But they gonna give you option. If they say, "America didn't accept you, we gonna try to send you Canada. If Canada didn't accept you, we try to send you Norway, New Zealand, eh England, whatever. You have a lot options."

T: Right.

A: They trying, they trying to get you where, somewhere. And they call my name, and the man say, "Hey, [Asma]!" Smile, smile. "America accept you!" "Are you saying right? Let me see the paper." [laughs] He give me the paper and I write it, and that day I just have two hundred, two hundred left all my money bills.

T: Yeah?

A: I don't have nothing else money, the months is twenty days, almost ten days left the month.

T: Okay.

[fade]

A: You know what I did that day?

T: What?

A: My friend, the one who was in Minnesota—I was shaking! I was accepted, but I couldn't believe, I was shaking, my hands was shaking—I talked to my, her, she was sitting close to me she was waiting for same thing, I say hey—but hers didn't come.

T: Yeah.

A: She didn't come, her paper, but she went to there for checkup.

T: Yeah.

A: But my paper is come, she's just checking.

T: Yeah.

A: They say, I say, "Hey, I have money." I decided to make happy for these people.

T: So what did you do?

A: I, I gave her two hundred...

T: Yeah.

A: I just take a couple, couple, and couple, not dollars, their money. I took a couple dollars to, to go back home.

T: Yeah.

A: And that's only for, for the, for the—for going back home only.

T: Yeah.

A: All the money—I think, one hundred eighty for their money, I give that girl, I say, "Go buy their something to drink, these people." They were waiting until morning, eight o'clock, eight o'clock the doors open, until it close, five o'clock.

T: Yeah.

A: They wait all day, to call their name. Even they cannot—they cannot go, go get lunch.

T: Yeah.

A: They have to be there because if they call their name or they're not here, no one gonna call them again.

T: So you said, "Buy them something?"

A: Yes. She left it, my friend, she left it, to go to store close to that place. She buy a lot of water, a lot of juice, a lot of drink, different drink kind, two bags, and she bring there.

T: Yeah.

A: And they were so happy, “Whooa!” They drink it. They just take it. And she say, “Hey, this the only money you have?” I say, “That’s the only money I have, but I promise, I’m not gonna take to home, I let them these people need them.”

[And with a few dollars and a few days remaining in her stay in Syria, Asma began to prepare for her journey to the United States.]